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article title: 'You can't imagine how terrible it is to make the wrong choice'. Faith, agency and self-pity in Tarkovsky's Stalker

author: Dominic Lash

affiliation: University of Bristol

email: domlash@hotmail.com

abstract: This article undertakes a reading of Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film Stalker that runs, for the most part, against the grain of the director's own pronouncements on the film. My focus is on a character study of the Stalker himself, and the consequences of his most unattractive characteristics: his manipulativeness, his petulance, and his self-pity. Rather than seeing the Stalker as an emblem of pure faith I explore the possibility that he is a quasi-tragic figure trapped by his own myopic idolatry. I also contrast the Stalker's lack of self-awareness with Stalker's reflexivity; I argue that interpreting the film in this way casts a fresh light on its crucial themes of faith and belief. I attempt, ultimately, to show that focussing on these negative characteristics reveals a perhaps surprising affinity between Stalker and the philosophical investigations into agency and self-knowledge that Robert Pippin has conducted by means of a study of film noir.

keywords: Tarkovsky, Stalker, self-pity; reflexivity; film noir; film-philosophy

'You can't imagine how terrible it is to make the wrong choice'. Faith, agency and self-pity in Tarkovsky's Stalker

The suggestion that critical study of Tarkovsky's films should take the director's own pronouncements with a good deal more salt than tended to be the case in the past is one that is made with increasing frequency.[1] In editing a collection on the director, Nathan Dunne 'resolved to proceed amongst territory in which Tarkovsky himself may have disapproved', hoping thereby to encourage 'future research on Tarkovsky... where there may be an unbridled sense of discovery without the recourse to unnecessary preconceptions over authenticity' (Dunne 6 & 9). Similar exhortations continue to be made: John A. Riley has recently argued that 'Tarkovsky's work has been guided, overshadowed, and often limited by Tarkovsky's own words and the traditional aesthetic values he upheld' (Riley 18). This article represents an attempt to follow such advice and to bring one particular film, 1979's Stalker, out from under the shadow of Tarkovsky's own words. In doing so it fundamentally disagrees with Mark Le Fanu's claim that 'if one regards the supernatural a jot less sympathetically than Tarkovsky and his protagonists do... the whole of his drama, and with it a great part of his claims as a film-maker, dissolves into a bundle of gestures' (Le Fanu 95-6). My aim is to show that one can regard certain aspects of Stalker (and in particular of the Stalker himself, played by Alexander Kaidanovsky) with a great deal less than full sympathy, and nonetheless be left with a powerful and coherent film. We might usefully view it as about faith rather than as requiring faith in order to be appreciated.

Stalker exemplifies the (far from uncommon) situation in which we encounter aspects of films that have moral or ethical impact and feel the urge to decide whether "the film" (and/or, perhaps, the filmmaker) judges them "positively" or "negatively", as well as being further compelled to relate this decision to our own judgement of these same aspects. One might feel, for

example, that "Stalker" tries to present the Stalker as admirable, but that "I" feel, nevertheless, to be compromised and often rather repellent. My methodological proposition here has, however, been to assume that if "I" feel him to be less than admirable, there must be reasons for this in the film. This is not simply to claim that the film has been misread up to now, but to explore the fruitful entanglement between content (in the broadest terms) and response, as a means of enriching not only our response but also our understanding of the content that provokes it. This article is, then, unapologetically focused on character, but given that the character in question is the eponymous central character of the film, this focus is intended as a means of access to some of Stalker's central ethical and thematic concerns.

The purposes of this article have both general and more specific aspects. The most general impetus is the desire to show, contra the suggestion of a senior academic who I recently heard praise a move in film studies away from "boring things like plot and character", that there is much to be gained from their continued study. This article assumes as correct Robert Pippin's claim that 'while screen images are not persons, and film narration is sui generis, there cannot be two completely distinct modalities of such sense-making: one for ordinary life and another governed by an incommensurable movie or dramatic or diegetic or aesthetic logic' (Pippin 2). Hence our assessment of characters in films, and their actions, can have a bearing on our understanding of persons and their actions in our non-fictional lives:

> This is especially true when the film presents characters acting in ways that demand some considerable effort to try to understand what is happening and why, when characters act in ways that seem initially baffling, or where motivations are opaque in

> some way, or when it is simply hard to know what is happening, what act description is relevant. (Pippin 3)

This article's more specific impetus is the desire to show that Stalker is just such a film. I shall take certain puzzling and unattractive features of its protagonist – centrally, his self-pity – and attempt to trace what happens if we think this through to its conclusions, rather than either ignoring it, explaining it away, or dismissing it as a failing. Critics, whether sympathetic to the film or not, have for the most part taken it as largely symbolic, or at any rate as not legible in terms of subtleties of motivation. They have thereby tended take the Stalker at what is supposed to be "face value", encouraged by some of the director's comments about the film. This article will argue that to do so is in fact to accept what certain characters in the film – notably his wife – believe about him as well as, crucially, what he believes about himself. But if we can open up a distance between film and character then rejecting these accounts in no way entails rejecting the film as a whole. It will, however, entail an attention to the ironies and ambiguities that the Stalker's self-pity creates, and to the fresh perspective it affords on the film's other ironies and ambiguities. I will express these ambiguities in a number of places by means of questions, in order to dramatize the way that attending to self-pity allows us to see the film as rendering questionable – during the process of watching as well as in retrospect – aspects of itself that have previously been most frequently read as rather dogmatic, chiefly concerning the role of faith.

Self-pity is not a subject that has received a great deal of attention in film, even though, as Glenn W. Most puts it, 'there seem in general to be few passions which in our daily lives we have such ample opportunity to observe expressed so richly, so deeply, so sincerely, both around us, and within us, as self-pity' (Most 58). I hope to show some ways in which it is a rich subject

for inquiry, particularly because it reflects on our understanding of agency, and on an agent's relation to their own agency. This article follows Pippin once again in assuming that:

> … the meaning of agency… is not properly understood as a timeless metaphysical issue, that the line between agents and impaired agents and nonagents is one that communities draw in all sorts of different ways over various periods... [A]gency is something like one of those "thick" concepts [his other examples are loyalty, moralism, self-righteousness, freedom, self-deceit, honor, justice, betrayal, selfishness; I propose to add self-pity], a norm of sorts, the conceptual content of which we can only understand in its variegated and complex uses for a community at a time. (Pippin 24-5)

The question of what we might learn about conceptions of agency and self-pity as they were specifically understood in Soviet society towards the end of the 1970s is beyond both the scope of this article and my own competence, but it is a question that would be well worth exploring, and one for which the study of films would be valuable. (One plausible suggestion is that the fact that Stalker 'explores themes of disaffection, alienation, and demoralisation, which make action less and less possible' has its roots in 'the collective loss of belief in historical agency driven by… above all, the Thaw – and a related scepticism towards the overarching cultural-political ideology of Socialist Realism' (Powell-Jones 77).) But while I will not attempt such wider contextual research here, I can and will attempt to clarify the notions of agency and self-pity such as they appear in this particular film.

This article is structured as follows. It begins by considering some contradictions and paradoxes to be found in the Stalker's character. After illustrating the kind of agency that is in

question by examining more closely a number of Stalker's actions and beliefs, which will lead us to the possibility that rather than a saintly Christ-figure he can equally plausibly be seen as a deluded blasphemer, the questions the film raises about the status of the Zone and of the mysterious Room that is the object of the protagonists' quest will be discussed. It will be argued that self-pity provides a fresh means of articulating the psychological and symbolic aspects of the film, and that considering the role of self-pity in Stalker also highlights the role of agency and one's attitude to one's own agency. The Stalker's lack of self-awareness will be contrasted with the film's own "self-awareness", or reflexivity; the relationship of this reflexivity to the ambiguities of narrative and character already discussed will be demonstrated. The article will conclude by returning to the question of agency and proposing that the Stalker's descent into self-pity can be seen as a fundamentally political failing, one that makes Stalker into a kind of tragedy, not simply because the Stalker fails, but because his fundamental flaw of self-pity blinds him not only to his success but to the very possibility of contemplating that he might have acted differently.

Fool, pseudo-fool or dangerously deluded?

To begin with, let us examine some contradictions and paradoxes that pertain to the character of the Stalker. It has often been noted that the Stalker has affinities with that peculiarly Russian figure, one which continually appears in Tarkovsky's cinema, namely the iurodivyi or holy fool. Indeed, he is explicitly referred to as such by Writer (Anatoly Solonitsyn), and, as Robert Efird explains, in her monologue towards the end of the film the Stalker's wife (Alisa Freindlikh) 'describes her husband as blazhennyi, or blessed, a rather explicit reference to the most famous of all Russian holy fools, Vasilii Blazhennyi, and a term widely used interchangeably with iurodivyi' (Efird 4). With no further context than cinema and literature –

thinking of other holy fools in Tarkovsky's cinema, such as Durochka (Irma Raush) in Andrei Rublev, or of figures that draw on the idea in Russian literature, such as, most famously, Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's The Idiot – one might assume the Holy Fool to be simply a kind of saintly innocent. In fact, however, the notion is more complex and involves a fundamental paradox, as Sergey A. Ivanov explains: 'The Orthodox Church holds that the holy fool voluntarily takes upon himself the mask of insanity in order that he may thereby conceal his own perfection from the world and thereby avoid the vanity of worldly praise' (Ivanov 1-2). Stalker's abject behavior and acceptance of Writer's description of him as a 'louse' might indeed be an attempt to 'avoid the vanity of worldly praise'. His profession (or vocation) of Stalker draws him to company, albeit limited company: those people he leads through the Zone to the Room. Tarkovsky's own defense of the Stalker is based on his idiocy, on the notion that his faith is an 'unconscious force', one 'that leads him away from being common, that renders him ridiculous, idiotic, but that reveals to him his own singularity, his spirituality' (Gianvito 168). But the notion 'that the holy fool voluntarily takes upon himself the mask of insanity' substantially complicates this idea.

How calculated, then, is then Stalker's behavior? Why, for example, does he force his companions to go before him? In the screenplay, Stalker suggests a fairly plausible practical reason: 'If anything happens to me, you'll never get out of here' ("Screenplays" 403). Surely, though, sending them first renders them more vulnerable to the Zone's dangers; does he, instead, want to test their faith? There would be no test of faith if Writer and Professor were already confident of their safety, having seen Stalker pass safely in front of them. The existence of border guards indicates clearly enough that some kind of Zone really exists, even if it tells us nothing of exactly what it is or why it is fenced off and defended, but we have only Stalker's

word for the specific dangers to be faced in the Zone. Writer says in his long monologue in the Dune Room that 'all this is someone's idiotic invention'.[2] Stalker confirms this, in a way, when he informs his companions that 'at each moment, it's as if we construct it according to our state of mind'. Outside the Room, Writer asks Professor (Nikolai Grinko): 'Who told you about the Zone, about Porcupine, about this Room?' and gets the answer, 'he did', meaning Stalker. The question comes after Writer elucidates the reason that Porcupine, Stalker's former teacher, killed himself: because he wished for his brother's life but got rich instead. The story of Porcupine could conceivably be an invention of Stalker's, which he hopes that his companions will decipher. This raises the question of whether Writer, at this point, understands something that Stalker hadn't seen, or succeeds in a hermeneutic task set for him by Stalker. If the answer is the former, then Stalker comes to seem rather dim – and we might well ask whether Stalker as we see him appears to have the imagination to have made up the story himself, although we should also remember the abundance of books that the Stalker's house contains which, as Alina Birzache argues, show that 'this broken man… is actually a well-read intellectual' (Birzache 89). But if the answer is the latter, why is Stalker so disappointed by what must surely be the understandable decision of Writer and Professor not to enter the Room? Why does he not consider the possibility that their decision shows humility rather than a lack of faith? We shall return to this question.

Robert Bird articulates the viewer's likely response to the Stalker's possible manipulations when he discusses the "loop" via which Stalker and Writer find their way back to Professor: 'it is difficult to rid oneself of the suspicion that he was actually leading the Writer, so to speak, up the garden path. The Stalker's strictures are improvised, not to protect his visitors from unknown dangers, but solely to stamp his authority on their quest' (Bird 163). There is also the business with the matches, when Stalker suggests they draw lots to see who will go first through the

tunnel called the Meat Grinder. Stalker simply ignores Writer's suggestion that a volunteer would be preferable, and the way that he throws away the second match out of sight of his companions means we are likely to conclude that Writer's later accusation has some merit: 'Do you think I didn't see you offer me two long matches?' The evidence on this point is equivocal. We do in fact see Stalker break the matches (he faces us, shielding the matches from the others with his body), but it is unclear (at least to me) whether he breaks them both to the same length or breaks only one. The shooting script, adapted by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky from their novel Roadside Picnic with Tarkovsky's uncredited input, is more explicit about the fact that Stalker does cheat with the matches, but it also more clearly relates his reasons to his faith. In the shooting script, the sequence that in the film takes place in the Dune Room happens before the Meat Grinder, and thus Stalker is impressed by the fact that the Zone lets Writer through: 'The matches – that was nonsense. Back there, in the hall, the Zone took pity on you. It became obvious that if anyone were fated to pass through the mincer, that person was you. Only you!' ("Screenplays" 408) But in the finished film the Dune Room, where Writer is "let off", is where the characters arrive after going through the Meat Grinder, thus making Stalker's manipulation, if that is what it is, harder to understand.

(Figure 1: Petulance. All images from Stalker (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979).)

Stalker seems, then, to be manipulative to at least some degree. He also exhibits both petulance and self-pity. These latter two characteristics come through most strongly towards the end of Stalker, but they are the culmination of an emotional trajectory that runs across the entire film. At the beginning, Stalker ignores his wife's pleas that he stay behind with a calm determination. At one point he looks at her with what appears to be genuine sympathy, then pulls away firmly but not violently. He does not appear irritated; rather, her words can simply have no

effect on his resolution to visit the Zone once again. When she tells him that he'll end up in prison again, his reply, 'I'm imprisoned everywhere' is delivered with a small quaver in his voice that could represent a self-pitying fatalism, but his back is to the camera, underplaying this emotional dimension. In the bar and during the dangerous journey to the outskirts of the Zone in the jeep, Stalker appears both nervous and determined. When they do arrive in the Zone, he exhibits pure, peaceful joy as he lies in the grass, his eyes closed, gently exhaling his tension. When he returns to his companions he is, for almost the only time in the film, calm, cool and collected. Subsequently, however, his wretchedness increases with the emotional intensity. The first real sign of petulance is, perhaps, when he screams at the other two: 'I demand discipline!' Later, when he stands up after being thrown down by Writer, he snivels and wipes his nose, his face covered in water, tears and blood, his eyes looking bleakly offscreen. His voice becomes more and more wracked by sobs, angrier but also higher in pitch and more imploring. After being again thrown to the ground and berated by Writer we see Stalker from a higher angle, looking up pathetically at his companions, eyes red with tears, his speech tumbling out like a child attempting to justify itself. These less attractive aspects of his character reach their greatest intensity in his final scene, as he lies in bed, tended to by his wife. Covered in sweat, eyes painfully screwed up, he berates his companions. If there have, earlier, been certain indications of a parallel between Christ and Stalker – most prominently in Stalker's recitation of the story of the road to Emmaus (to be discussed below), and Writer's presumably parodic fashioning of a crown of thorns – then Stalker's last appearance almost seems like a parody of Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane. He doesn't ask for the cup to be taken away from him, while agreeing to accept it if it is truly his lot. Rather, he whines that nobody seems to want a messiah any more: 'Nobody believes. Not only those two. Nobody.' (Though there is certainly something

unattractive in the Stalker's wife's vision of married life as involving unconditional devotion to her husband, in her final monologue she avoids self-pity more successfully than he does, instead expressing the beauty of joy that is surrounded by sorrow. She gradually masters her tears, her voice strengthens, and it seems like conviction rather than special pleading when she declares that 'if there were no sorrow in our lives, it wouldn't be better. It would be worse. Because then there would be no happiness either.')

(Figure 2: Self-pity.)

A number of other critics have seen self-pity in the Stalker. Le Fanu observes that '[t]ime and again Kaidanovsky's features, the whole posture of his body, seem to be wracked by perplexity: more than this, by self-pity' (Le Fanu 98). Vida T. Johnson and Graham Petrie see this as a kind of mistake on Tarkovsky's part that somewhat undermines what they take to be his intentions for the film:

> Though this "breaking" [of the 'intellectual and spiritual hardness' of Writer and Professor] does seem to happen, at least to some extent, by the end of their journey, he [Stalker] appears – surprisingly – not to accept or recognize this. His expressions of despair to his wife on his return home, and his sense of failure as he condemns his companions for their lack of belief and their materialism and complains that no one needs him or the Room, have the effect of undercutting this sense of possible change for the viewer and help to give the film a bleaker and more despairing tone than Tarkovsky seems to have intended. (Johnson and Petrie 149)

We might ask whether or not self-pity is compatible with the essential humility that so many have seen in Stalker. Stalker himself at one point extols softness (also translated as weakness) as a virtue, associating it, in his prayer for his companions, with youth and flexibility:

> May they laugh at their own passions. ... But above all, may they believe in themselves and become as helpless as children. For softness is great and strength is worthless. When a man is born, he is soft and pliable. When he dies, he is strong and hard. ... That which has become hard will not triumph.

The elements of this prayer concerning softness and hardness derive from the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi (see "Diaries" 147). But Stalker's petulance might be seen less as the expression of a childlike innocence than of a much more culpable childishness. Why does Stalker not recognize in himself the very same failing he berates his companions for? He certainly never seems even close to laughing at his own passions, as he prays that his companions may do; his own devotion to the Zone seems to have become extremely 'hard', hence his final despair. Given the film's explicit references to Christianity we should remember that despair is a sin; for Catholics it is a mortal sin. Although Orthodox Christianity does not have quite the same notion, despair is a very serious sin in eastern forms of Christianity as well.

So, too, is idolatry. It is customary – whether the fact is applauded or deplored – to see Stalker as a Christ-like figure. But what happens to this allegory when we note that Christianity clearly exists in the film's world, as indicated by the citations from scripture? What should a faithful Christian's attitude to the Zone be? In a Christian allegory such as C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia this particular problem never arises because Jesus does not exist as such in Narnia; to worship Aslan is to worship Jesus. But here the question is more delicate and

generates another paradox or, at least, an ambiguity. If there were no Christian material in the film, the allegory could be straightforward, but since there is, the question is raised as to whether Stalker's faith is idolatrous. Is his final despair related to his inability to recognize that his faith has been misdirected? This notion does in fact have some support from the director. His diary entry for 26th August 1977, as translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair, refers to the character of the Stalker, rethought from the version that appears in the source novel, as needing to be 'a slave, a believer, a pagan of the Zone' ("Diaries" 147). Johnson and Petrie claim that this 'makes little sense', and offer instead 'a believing slave and apostle of the Zone' (Johnson and Petrie 304 n. 2 & 138). But a middle ground is offered by Muireann Maguire's translation of Evgeny Tsymbal's account of the film's prehistory, where the passage appears as 'the Zone's slave, disciple, pagan' (Tsymbal 276).

At the close of the extraordinary dream sequence in the center of the film, Stalker mutters the story of the road to Emmaus from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 24: 13-18), in which Jesus appears after his resurrection to two disciples, who initially do not recognize him. Johnson and Petrie analyze this sequence as follows:

> As he speaks there is a cut to Professor lying down, with his eyes closed, and the camera then tracks slowly along his body to show Writer resting his head against Professor, also with his eyes closed. The camera stops on Writer's face with the words "But their eyes were holden that they should not know him" – at which point Writer opens his eyes. The camera then tracks back to Professor's face and stops there on the words of Cleopas, as he speaks to, but does not recognise, Jesus. Although Professor's eyes are now open, the very specific matching of camera

> movement and words here clearly suggests that Writer has the capacity for redemption (opening his eyes) while the more pragmatic Professor has the capacity to see but does not yet use it. (Johnson and Petrie 146)

This analysis seems to me a little far-fetched, and to underplay the ambiguity of the scene. On what basis does the fact of Writer opening his eyes override the text ("their eyes were holden") whereas in the case of Professor the text overrides the fact that his eyes are open (he has, after all, opened them since we last saw him, earlier in the very same shot)? The sequence begins with Stalker waking up, opening his eyes (looking directly into the camera), sitting up and glancing across at his sleeping companions (checking that they are still asleep?) before beginning his recitation from Luke. The subsequent gazes of both men are directly at the camera, and thus directly at Stalker, and both are quietly penetrating (not quite accusatory but certainly with a note of gentle skepticism) despite the fact that the two men have just woken up (see figure three). The shot that pans over the men as they wake up is an echo of the film's very first horizontal dolly from above, which moves from a bedside table, over Stalker's wife, his daughter, and Stalker himself in bed, and back again. When we first pass over the wife, her eyes are already open, but only just, such that one could mistake them for being closed (we see only her right profile). When the camera passes back over her, she has not changed the position of her body but her eyes are now wide open.

(Figure 3: "You awake?")

There is, then, a crucial ambiguity as to whether the gazes of Writer and Professor indicate that they recognize Stalker's resemblance to Christ or catch him out thinking that he

resembles Him. After both men look at Stalker we cut to the same view of the back of his head we saw before when he began his recitation. He turns round and asks, 'You awake?' Did he interrupt his quotation of Luke because they woke up? I find here – mostly from the quality of the gazes of Writer and Professor, but also from the way that Stalker's question might express uncertainty over whether or not he has been overheard – just a hint of a sense that Stalker has been caught out by the other two, which offers the possibility that he has delusions of grandeur. Geoff Dyer describes the situation well, in his deliberately facetious style: 'They really are sitting there listening, both thinking the same thing: Has this Stalker of theirs got a Messiah complex?' (Dyer 135) The wife's monologue at the end of the film renders almost explicit the parallels between Christ and Stalker ('when he came up to me and said "Come with me," I went'). But we would do well to consider how disconcerting the fact that he tells the Emmaus story himself might be for that interpretation. If other people see one as Christ-like, that is one thing, but if one sees *oneself* in such a fashion is that not the height of self-deception? The Stalker seems to exhibit signs not only of sinful despair and idolatrous devotion (to the Zone) but also a possibly blasphemous hubris.

Before leaving this subject, we should not forget the diary entry Tarkovsky wrote on 28th January 1979, when the film was very nearly completed, concerning his idea of making another version of the film with the same actors in which 'Stalker starts forcibly to drag people to the Room and turns into a 'votary' a 'fascist'. 'Bullying them into happiness" ("Diaries" 169). This might seem like a project for a kind of reversal or inversion of the film, but I hope to have shown why it could also be considered less as a negative image of Stalker than as a way of strengthening threads that are latent in the film as we have it.

Inner and outer realities

Efird is correct that 'there are indications that the room itself may be solely the invention of the Stalker as a means for testing the faith of his companions – though the film, much like the character, is perhaps deliberately murky in this area' (Efird 5). In saying this one has the director's imprimatur: he told Aldo Tassone that 'in the Strugatsky story, the desires were truly fulfilled, whereas in the script this remains a mystery. You don't know whether this is true or whether it's the Stalker's fantasy' (Gianvito 55). Not only were the fantastic science fiction elements of the original narrative pared away, but so was any confirmation of the existence of the miraculous, with just two possible exceptions: the mysterious voice that calls Writer back, and the telekinetic powers of Stalker's daughter Monkey in the final scene. This puts the emphasis on faith itself; if the Room were proved to be efficacious, not to believe in it would be irrational, rather than a sign of lack of faith.

In questioning the precise status of the Zone and the Room we are dealing with a question both of diegesis – because the question is active for the characters in the fictional world – and of narration in the broadest sense, which is to say a question concerning the film's narrative mode: realist, fantastic, allegorical, and so forth. The Zone, and the Room, can be interpreted as reflecting the Stalker's consciousness both diegetically, in terms of the plot (are they his inventions?), and formally, as a kind of pathetic fallacy (does the way the film represent them give us access to the way Stalker sees them?). Self-pity provides a way of articulating these two aspects. In a 1965 article on self-pity, the psychiatrist Eugen Kahn writes that '[t]he oversensitive person' – a type which the Stalker could very reasonably be said to belong – 'feels himself, as it were, constantly threatened by the malice of the environment' (Kahn 447). Self-pity serves, in Stalker, both as a means for creating particular kinds of narrative ambiguity (is the Zone

dangerous or is the Stalker so self-pitying that he sees danger everywhere?) and as an object that these same ambiguities can be used to explore (what kinds of self-pity are displayed in the film?).

It is, then, possible to interpret Stalker not merely in affective or allegorical terms, but by taking account of a character's outlook, their own acts of (conscious or unconscious) narrativizing. This involves a complex series both of blurrings and of separations; it requires us to interpret the film's action as taking place in some kind of world, about which we can make judgements concerning truth and falsity, honesty and hypocrisy, self-knowledge and the lack thereof – judgements which would be either impossible or inappropriate with respect to a purely affective or allegorical reading. To perceive a character's narrativizing as such, we need a distance between the character and "the film" that a strictly allegorical reading will find hard to maintain. This is a point of contact between Stalker and the aspects of film noir that Pippin addresses in his 2012 book Fatalism in American Film Noir. In saying this, I want to be absolutely clear that I am not claiming that Stalker is any kind of neo-noir (even though we know both that Tarkovsky had some interest in the genre given that his first film, co-directed in 1956 with Marika Beiku and Aleksandr Gordon while students at VGIK, was an adaptation of Hemmingway's The Killers, and that noir elements are very present in Roadside Picnic) but only that it explores issues to do with agency and self-knowledge comparable to those present in the film noirs discussed by Pippin.

Pippin defends the ending of Orson Welles's The Lady of Shanghai (1947) – in which Michael O'Hara (Welles) departs the funhouse leaving behind a dying Elsa (Rita Hayworth) – against Andrew Britton's claim that it is 'indisputably, one of the cinema's most disgraceful endings' (Britton 219). Pippin insists that 'we are given several indications throughout... that we

are, in effect, in Michael's novel and that one of the purposes of that novel seems to be to allow him to put this sort of narrative together and try to make it credible, above all to himself' (Pippin 72). Even though he may an intellectual, the Stalker is certainly not a novelist; but Stalker, too, gives us access to the way that its protagonist constructs his world. For Michael that process is largely retrospective, whereas the Stalker actually tries to bring people with him into his own world ('Here we are, home at last' are his first words upon entering the Zone). A major contrast between Michael and the Stalker is that Michael keeps telling himself that he is a fool (or a "boob"), that he was deceived (including by himself), which the Stalker never does. But Pippin's argument is that Michael thereby avoids recognizing other crucial ways in which he was self-deceived, specifically concerning his own capacity for agency: he blames his foolishness rather than his failure to act differently. My claim is that the Stalker's self-pity is similarly exculpatory, and enables him, too, to avoid any really honest assessment of his own agency.

The very way the film represents the entry into the Zone can even be read as a dramatization of what we might call the passage into pathetic fallacy, a process both gradual and sudden. During the long sequence on the trolley car, close-ups on the faces of the three protagonists emphasize their psychology but leave inaccessible exactly what they are thinking about. The sound is very gradually transformed electronically, introducing reverberations that generate an altered sense of space but are also clearly artificial; we are entering "another" kind of space. Suddenly the image changes, the exact moment unpredictable no matter how many times one has seen the film, and we pass from sepia into color, into a world of green that is somehow both faded and ordinary and wholly extraordinary. After an initial, unpeopled, point-of-view shot that dollies left to represent the moving trolley, pauses, and then pans right to represent the gaze of the protagonists, the film's second color shot is in mid-long shot, placing the three protagonists

in the landscape, yet not expansively so. There is a prominent foreground, littered with debris; we cannot clearly see the vista that the characters, placed at the top of a ridge, would be able to see. The result is an unstable balance between figure and environment, between seeing a character in a situation and seeing how the character sees their situation. This kind of blurring of inside and outside, which the film exploits increasingly from now on, is supremely suited both to allegorical and psychological ends: the outside either signifies the meaning inside (allegory) or it expresses it (psychology). These two possibilities are not necessarily incompatible or mutually destructive. (Pippin makes some remarks to similar effect, commenting that the notion that 'one has to choose between treating characters as persons or treating fictional entities as properties of or instantiations of structure, words, images, social or libidinal forces, and so forth' seems to him 'a false duality' (Pippin 108).) By emphasizing the possibility of other ways of reading Stalker, I certainly do not wish to deny its allegorical or symbolic dimensions.

The reflexive Zone

We have noted what seems to be a rather acute lack of self-awareness in the Stalker. We find rather more indications of self-awareness, not in Stalker, but in Stalker. Even though the wife's direct address to the audience was not the initial conception for the monologue, because 'the scene was shot in the bar, with the speech clearly delivered to Writer and Professor, and was moved to its present position only during editing', the effect is not only striking but connected with other patterns in the film (Johnson and Petrie 283). To begin with, it is an echo of a less extensive direct address at the beginning of the film: Freindlich also looks directly into the camera just before the Stalker leaves, as the wife shouts after him 'Go, then! And may you rot there!' Another example comes during Stalker's monologue on the nature of the Zone at the end of part one; when he repeats 'this is the Zone', he too looks directly at the camera.

(Figure 4: "This is the Zone.")

Dyer notes the games played with montage and point of view soon after the entry into the Zone, giving the impression that we are sharing Professor's point of view, only for all three men to come into frame, thus creating 'a disquieting sense of there being an extra pair of eyes... like an additional consciousness (that of the Zone itself?), alert and waiting' (Dyer 81). Another notable instance of this occurs during Writer's long monologue in the Dune Room, which is captured in a single long take. The camera slowly closes in on Writer as he sits on the edge of a large pipe, and then moves around him, consistently framing him from slightly above, which combines with the way Solonitsyn regularly looks into the lens to give the impression that he is speaking to someone standing next to him. At the end of his speech, however, after a particularly sustained and intense look directly into the camera, Writer looks down and a cut shows Stalker and Professor in long shot, standing many yards away, still on the other side of the room, as they were when the monologue commenced. The film's tendency to blur the distinction between what a character sees and how they see is, in these instances, taken a stage further, in that they indicate somebody's seeing but not who that somebody might be. Responding to these elements of the film, Bird remarks that the Zone 'cannot simply be identified with the camera. The Zone is where one goes to see one's innermost desires. It is, in short, the cinema' and Dyer simply states that '[t]he Zone is film' (Bird 69 and Dyer 81). But, as Bird indeed warns, one should not be too simplistic regarding this kind of identification. The metaphor of the Zone allows these techniques to equivocate, or make some kind of equivalence, between designating these uncanny unlocalized gazes as representations of the Zone (a fantastic yet diegetic explanation), as an engagement with the audience (direct address), or as an acknowledgement by the film of itself (reflexivity).

The notion that connects Stalker's reflexivity with its theme of faith – that connects the Zone as cinema with the Zone as the Stalker's pathetic fallacy – could, more neutrally, be called belief. (Self-pity, I will argue later, is shown by the film to be a means of avoiding confrontation with a lack of self-belief.) I disagree with David Foster's characterization of 'Stalker's foregrounding of reflexivity, at the expense of maintaining a coherent narrative and narrative space', because the film's reflexivity is profoundly connected with the way that it generates its narrative space (Foster 315). Our sense of the Zone – which is not only a narrative issue, but is nonetheless central to the narrative – comes about, in part, precisely through reflexive techniques. Dyer links Stalker's insistence on belief to our belief, as viewers, in the final scene of Monkey's telekinesis. We can't see how it's done no matter how closely we look, he claims, and 'that's the wonder of cinema'.[3] In fact it is at times possible to just about see the wire that pulls the jar and glasses. We are helped in this by the presence of the white fluffy seeds that drift through the air in this scene (as they also did in the previous scene of Stalker in bed). The mechanics of the scene could, had Tarkovsky wished, have been made harder to perceive (if the fluff had been left out). The poem by Fyodor Tyuchev that Monkey reads is all about the gaze (even though it claims that there's 'greater charm' in 'lowered' eyes), and so is the scene. Monkey's gaze makes the glasses move and, perhaps, makes the dog be quiet. Through our gaze as viewers we interpret the scene, and wonder how it is done; what Bird calls 'the crossing of gazes' is crucial (Bird 223). I do not think it would be going too far to compare the final sequence with the Club Silencio sequence in David Lynch's Mulholland Dr. (2001), where it is demonstrated how willing we are to believe in cinematic illusion no matter how many times it is pointed out as such. We believe, despite knowing perfectly well that it is an illusion. But rather than believing despite this knowledge, we can also believe because of it. The fact that cinema

can be so powerful when its artifice is perceptible is more remarkable than if its power was predicated solely on the successful concealment of artifice. Stalker's reflexivities can be seen as acknowledgements of this fact; the film demonstrates, contrary to what the Stalker himself believes, that unquestioning devotion is not the most effective basis for belief.

Agency and self-pity

I have tried, above, to trace a process in which we move from wondering if the Stalker is manipulative or hypocritical (either inventing dangers, or manipulating situations in which there are dangers), to the question of his self-delusion (his Messiah complex) and how this contrasts with the film's own self-knowledge. All these threads culminate, emotionally and structurally, in the final sequences of self-pity which indicate the Stalker's fundamental lack of awareness, both of self and of others. Throughout this article I have been asking to what extent we might say that Stalker is deceitful, hypocritical or self-deceived. It is possible that he is none of these, any one or two of them, or all three. The evidence is strong that he is deceitful to some degree, though ambiguity about the exact degree is central to the film's texture. As to the other two characteristics, I think the most plausible and interesting possibility is that he is essentially self-deceived without being hypocritical, despite Writer's accusation that he is a 'hypocritical louse'. (We might note that Stalker accepts the designation of 'louse' but denies hypocrisy.) Bird rightly remarks that it is 'unlikely that the Stalker's entire quest is intended to be seen as a mere sham' (Bird 168). A lack of hypocrisy also goes some way to explaining the continuities between Stalker's behavior when he is with his companions, and when they are sleeping or absent, as in his final scene.

The combination of self-deception with an essential lack of hypocrisy brings us again to the kinds of questions Pippin finds so well addressed in film noir. Even though at the end of the

film the Stalker look back on his activity, the narration of Tarkovsky's film doesn't have the kind of retrospective temporality by means of which the archetypal noir protagonist attempts to represent events as fated, in order to diminish their own agency. But the prominence of self-pity in the Stalker does, nevertheless, use the resources of filmic narration and characterization to address agency and self-knowledge in ways that have more parallels with certain film noirs than one might have expected; compare the Stalker's statement that 'I never choose. You can't imagine how terrible it is to make the wrong choice', with Michael O'Hara's claim that 'I never make up my mind about anything at all until it's all over and done with'. Pippin writes with reference to Robert Mitchum's character Jeff Bailey in Jacques Tourneur's Out of the Past (1947), that:

> ... Jeff and other noir heroes and antiheroes must sort out for themselves when exculpatory appeals like "I couldn't help myself," "I had no choice," "I didn't intend to" are in fact reasonable excuses and when they are self-deceptions, evasions, or self-serving lies. (Pippin 49)

Writer raises this same kind of question when he admits that his earlier claim about wanting to visit the Zone for inspiration was false: 'But how can I put a name to what it is that I want? How am I to know I don't want what I want or that I really don't want what I don't want?' He wonders how it is that we can say whether our actions are or are not willed if we don't have access to what it is that we desire or intend – if, that is, we have no way of discovering whether our sense of our own motivation is accurate or not. The fact that these lines are also self-indulgent drunken ramblings does not reduce their pertinence. The distinction that Pippin makes between hypocrisy and self-deception is helpful in understanding the character of the Stalker. Of Michael in The Lady from Shanghai, Pippin writes:

> He reveals that he is simply incapable of registering and acknowledging his own culpability... His viewing himself as such a diminished agent... constitutes him as one... and so his own relation to his deeds becomes for him constituted by such a self-image. ... Michael is self-deceived, not hypocritical, and he is self-deceived because of what he is, and he is what he is because of what he can and cannot admit about himself. (Pippin 73)

It is the Stalker's obsessive faith, rather than (as is usually the case in noir) an encounter with a femme fatale, that has generated a 'power that robs a man of his free will, or initiates an amour fou, an obsessional, irrational, all-powerful desire' (Pippin 50). This power renders Stalker incapable of registering, if not his own culpability per se, as the very possibility that his own failings might enter into the equation. Is that the real reason he does not even begin to question himself as he lies in spiritual agony at the end of the film? There is a dialectic of selflessness and selfishness here: that Stalker does not even consider himself and his own actions at the end of the film is a selflessness so extreme that it becomes a form of selfishness bordering on solipsism. (His language also at times indicates a more straightforward selfishness: 'Don't deprive me of what's mine!' he implores outside the Room, and he tells his wife at the end that 'the most terrible thing is that... all my efforts are in vain.') The fact that Stalker manipulates his companions in order to test their faith does not mean that he is a hypocrite if he is so simultaneously self-absorbed and lacking in self-understanding that he does not even consider the role that his own agency plays. He views himself as such a 'diminished agent', so enamored is he of his holy passivity in the face of the ineffable activity of the Zone, that he thinks he has no need to make any decisions at all. Bird makes some observations that are relevant here: 'It is doubtful whether any of Tarkovsky's characters are shown in their authentic 'being'. ... Only Solaris asks directly:

who is this person with whom I share space?' (Bird 116) My central claim could be expressed in the form of the proposition that Stalker can be read in terms of the failure of the protagonist to ask this very question.

To conclude, I want to ask whether we learn anything about self-pity from Stalker. The crux comes at the end of the film. The wife says that Writer and Professor 'should be pitied, not abused'. The film explicitly raises the idea that Stalker's pity, like his faith, is misdirected. This makes the Stalker both harder to like and harder to condemn; if we're honest we know we are all subject to self-pity. But Stalker shows that self-pity is not merely a bad habit that some of us indulge more than other. The film demonstrates the connection between self-pity and the questions of what it is that we can want, and what can we know about what we want. This is what really binds Stalker to the questions of agency that preoccupy Pippin. Outside the Zone, Writer – recalling his earlier remarks about knowing whether we really want what we think we want – says that we can't really want things like world peace, but can only recommend them, abstractly: 'These aren't desires but an ideology, actions, concepts'. Writer has become cynical again after his own apogee of self-pity in the Dune Room, but that doesn't mean he's wrong; nor need it demean or diminish ideology, actions, or concepts to point out that they are not the same as desires. For an action to be an action it has to be able conceivably to result in the outcome towards which it is directed: 'Someone who believes that by dressing beautifully every day, he is promoting justice in the world is doing something, but he is not doing that' (Pippin 21). A name for dealing with this truth – the truth that if we want to work towards, say, peace, we cannot do so simply on the basis of our inner desires – might be "politics". If so, in that self-pity can help one to avoid examining the relation of one's desires to one's actions, to one's thoughts, and to the actions of others, it might all too easily result in an evasion of politics (in the broadest sense).

If this is at all plausible, then despite the hope that may be represented by Monkey's wondrous powers (the film's final ambiguity concerns whether or not Stalker will recognize these powers and, if he does, whether he will see them as a reward for his faith or as still further evidence of the world's slide into godlessness), despite a wife's powerful love for her husband, and even despite the lessons that Writer and Professor have at least begun to learn, Stalker might represent, for Stalker himself, something close to tragedy. But how close exactly? Stalker refuses to consider that he could have acted otherwise, whereas the tragic figure wishes that he had. The ironic complication here is that the Stalker's fatal flaw, what Aristotle calls hamartia – although this translation of the Greek term has been strongly challenged, it has also been argued that 'the word has a range of applications, from "ignorance" at one end to "moral defect", "moral error", at the other' (Stinton 221) – is, precisely, his inability to conceive of altering (or of having altered) his own behavior. In another irony, for Aristotle the hero's hamartia leads to a growing intensity of pity and fear in the audience, but here the flaw leads primarily to its own increase in the character (see Russell and Winterbottom 222-3 & 226-7). Stalker is prone to self-pity, which events serve only to intensify to the point of paralysis. In an interesting philological twist, hamartia also has a theological meaning, which in its simplest form just means sinful acts, as in the Epistle to the Romans 5:12, "all have sinned". Stalker could therefore be read as a kind of cautionary Christian tragedy: we all commit sin (hamartia in Saint Paul's sense), and self-pity (Stalker's particular hamartia in Aristotle's sense) is one of the sins we all commit – if not to such an extreme degree.

We need not be Christians ourselves, however, to see in Stalker a compelling portrait of a developing moral and psychological paralysis, rather than an accidentally bleak portrayal of a saintly figure. When he correctly deciphers the story of Porcupine, Writer declares: 'Conscience,

spiritual torment – this is just an intellectual invention. He understood that, and hanged himself'.[4] That agonies of conscience are not in themselves virtuous might be the true lesson of the Zone, and both Writer and Professor are able both to learn this and to embrace the flexibility, the 'softness', needed in order not to kill themselves in response. But Stalker can see no link between their reasons for not entering the Room and the reason why he doesn't want his wife to go there: 'What if you fail, too?' In a final ironic twist, he wants to prevent her from trying, in order to sustain his own faith, but illogically understands the fact that Writer and Professor made the very same decision as evidence of their *lack* of faith. William Empson writes in Seven Types of Ambiguity that 'people, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will still have lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently' (Empson 66). Stalker, however, uses his self-pity to neutralize this 'lingering' sense, indulging in the consolatory effects of the emotion and blocking any consideration of the possibility of acting differently. The 'hardness' of his devotion means that he cannot understand what, according to the logic of his own position, the Zone has to teach, and therefore cannot even raise the question of what the appropriate response might be. He comforts himself with self-pity but is thereby left alone with only himself for company.

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[2] Unless it is indicated otherwise, dialogue is quoted from the English subtitles to the 2017 Criterion Blu-ray edition of Stalker.

[3] Geoff Dyer, interview included on Criterion Blu-ray edition of Stalker (Criterion Collection 888, 2017).

[4] I quote here from "Screenplays" 413; the version in the Criterion subtitles is: 'Conscience and soul-searching were all invented by the mind. When he realized all that, he hanged himself.'

Dominic Lash is a PhD candidate at the University of Bristol whose thesis explores critical orientation and disorientation in the work of David Lynch, Leos Carax, Pedro Costa and Jean-Luc Godard. He has previously undertaken graduate studies in contemporary music and poetry. Recent publications include an article on musical anachronism in Kubrick's Barry Lyndon in Cinergie and a chapter on Eva-Maria Houben, Emily Dickinson and Charles Ives in Writing the Field Recording (Edinburgh University Press, 2018).